

Testimony in support of HB0114/SB0129

Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program

To: Hon. William Smith, Jr., Chair, Hon. Jeff Waldstreicher, Vice-chair and members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

From: Martha Wells, Congregation Action Network

Date: February 2, 2022

I am writing in **support of House Bill 0114/Senate Bill 0129**, Access to Counsel in Immigration Proceedings Program, on behalf of the Congregation Action Network (CAN). I am a member of the Congregation Action Network, a network of faith communities in Washington, DC, and the Maryland and Virginia suburbs acting in solidarity to end detention, deportation, profiling, and criminalization of immigrants and demanding and upholding justice, dignity, safety, and family unity. With over 75 congregations and a thousand members throughout the capital area, including over 25 congregations with thousands of members in Montgomery and Prince George's counties, we live our faith in advocacy for and solidarity with our immigrant neighbors.

As people of faith committed to ending the detention and deportation of immigrants, we adhere to the sacred texts of most major faiths that call for welcoming the stranger and treating each other with love, dignity, respect, and compassion. We believe in liberation and that immigrant families should be united and free - never incarcerated.

HB0114/SB129 would provide legal representation for Maryland residents facing detention or deportation in immigration court. Having legal counsel has been shown to be the critical difference in whether an immigrant gets to be free pending adjudication of his or her asylum request, and whether an immigrant is deported or is allowed to live freely and safely with his or her family in the U.S. Keeping families whole is a fundamental tenet of many faith traditions.

Those facing incarceration in criminal court are provided an attorney if needed, since the serious consequences of incarceration are recognized. Those facing detention and deportation in immigration court are facing the same and worse, as deportation can sometimes literally be a death sentence.

Before the pandemic, CAN observed several immigration court proceedings in the Baltimore federal building. The pattern was clear - those with an attorney still had a difficult time obtaining bond or asylum, but often succeeded, while those without an attorney typically either lost their case or just gave up and self-deported. Justice demands that all have a chance to make their case for freedom and asylum.

I respectfully urge you to reach a **favorable** report for HB014/SB129. It will provide true due process to all residents of Maryland facing loss of their liberty and home. It is the right and moral thing to do.

Respectfully yours,

Martha Wells, Cluster Leader, Congregation Action Network (Prince Georges County)
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